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Rethinking Expeditions

On Critical Expeditionary Practice

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I. Introduction

For two months in 2015, we undertook an expedition “Into No-Man’s Land” (Leshem and Pinkerton 2015). We travelled more than 6,000 miles from Nomansland Common in rural Hertfordshire in southern England toward the unclaimed desert enclave of Bir Tawil on the Egypt-Sudan border. Throughout the journey we visited other sites that have been described as no-man’s lands—including the historic strip that stretched between the trenches of the Great War and the ‘Buffer Zone’ that divides the island of Cyprus—and other, less obvious spaces that are nonetheless experiencing similar processes of abandonment and enclosure (see Leshem and Pinkerton 2016). But this was no single-minded exercise to reach a coveted destination. During the expedition, we worked closely with those who inhabit, work in, or have been forced to abandon these spaces, and sought to connect their insights and experiences into a more human-centred understanding of no-man’s land. Our multiple conversations shaped and guided our journey, repeatedly revealing hidden architectures and ecologies of no-man’s land in spaces as varied as the Black Pine forests of the Somme, the vineyards of the Bulgaria-Greece border, and the hastily constructed migrant encampments along Europe’s internal borders.

In undertaking this expedition we were also acutely cognizant of the highly problematic status of this practice in contemporary social science—its deep roots in imperial conquest, extraction and settler colonialism. The practical appeal of significant financial and logistical resources attached to expeditions and the opportunity to link a broad set of research sites over a sustained period in the field, also raise questions about the intellectual merits of such transient research; and funding provided to us by Land Rover and the Royal Geographical Society further highlights institutional dependencies and commercial agendas that have the potential to overshadow core intellection objectives. Reflecting on their own expeditionary research, Bunkenborg and Pedersen note that expeditions have long been relegated to the margins of the social sciences, “Dismissed for failing to provide anything but superficial impressions and later tainted by their association with an aggressive colonialism” (2012, 416). Nor is this simply a matter of embarrassment regarding methodological history: Joel Wainwright (2012) recent study of the collusion between military funding and academic knowledge production in the mapping of indigenous lands in southern

Mexico in 2006, is a powerful reminder of the problematics of expeditionary knowledge production in 21st century geography. We therefore begin this paper by outlining the long decline of the expedition, focusing in particular on its colonial-militarized histories and epistemologies.

Our argument in this paper, however, is that the expedition can still harbour the potential for critical research. This effort relies on the ability to distinguish the *expedition* as a practice from the ethos of *exploration* that has been associated with it and linked it to imperial and militant legacies. Despite their historical and epistemological links, the two are not interchangeable. The expedition is a structured practice of mobile knowledge production, supported or directed by an institutional benefactor, while exploration designates a military-intellectual project that seeks, to use Conrad's (2010, 12) famous phrase, to conquer truth itself. By considering the expedition in this way, we are able, firstly, to bring to the fore the messy realities of expeditions, which rarely conform to the orderly tenets of Enlightenment science that govern cultures of exploration (Driver 2000). Secondly, this practical focus sets the expedition in a clearer relation to other forms of fieldwork: Expeditions involve a variety of mobility practices and encompass other methods of data gathering – from natural history collections to ethnography and photography. However, we contend that expeditions still entail unique conventions and norms that merit greater scrutiny on their own terms. Section III therefore highlights several core strands in the critique of the expedition, its underlying ethos and logics, which also provide alternative methodological and conceptual horizons for rethinking this contentious research practice. As in the work of several postcolonial scholars within and beyond the discipline, this was partly a counter-historiographical project that sought to dispel the foundational myths of expeditionary discourse. In other cases, highlighted in feminist historiography and radical experiments with the expedition, these were actual research “journeys” that challenged the practical and epistemological conventions of exploration.

In section IV we offer two vignettes from our own expedition, which illustrate how these critical genealogies can inform contemporary expeditionary practices and potentially chart a way around some of the pitfalls of expeditionary conventions. To be clear, our aim is not to present a comprehensive alternative to conventional expeditionary practice. This is, first, because expeditionary history remains steeped in epistemic and physical violence, a legacy that continues to haunt contemporary expeditions. Secondly, expeditions are inherently linked to structures of privilege that afford some individuals the time, financial resources, institutional endorsements and political protections necessary for the execution of these endeavours. These privileges have been the target of several bodies of critical scholarship that we discuss at length below. We

therefore remain deeply suspicious of any promise of a “rehabilitated” expeditionary model; as we note, previous experimentations with radical forms of “counter-expeditions” often fell far short of their grand promises. Rather than a unambiguous endorsement of a positive model of expeditions, our aim is to point to tactical interventions (de Certeau 1988) that emerge out of practice, experience, reassessment and correction. We conclude by reflecting on additional directions critical expeditionary interventions can take, while also recognising the limitations of these critical horizons.

II. The Expedition: Initial Contours of a Long Decline

A dark shadow continues to hang over the expedition and its complicity in the imperial project. As an instrument of colonial military conquest and territorial claim-making, several scholars in the past two decades have pointed to its association with geography’s tradition of exploration and the inculcation of scientific institutions, epistemology and practice in the service of Empire (Clayton 2000; Driver 2000; Edney 1997). Though scholars within and beyond the discipline of geography have, from the 1980s, interrogated the “deep involvement” of exploration and its cultures within the “practical and imaginative dimensions of Western imperialism” (J. R. Ryan 2013, 9), it is important to remember that the hypocrisies of colonial expeditions were exposed to public scrutiny as early as the 18th century. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, first published in 1726, Jonathan Swift offers a scathing satirical description of these practices:

"a Crew of Pirates are driven by a Storm they know not whither, at length a Boy discovers Land from the Topmast, they go on Shore to rob and plunder, they see an harmless People, are entertained with kindness, they give the Country a new name, they take formal Possession of it for the King, they set Plank or a Stone for a Memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by Force for a sample; Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right*. Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modern Colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People." (italics in the original Swift 1726, 271)

This passage is significant not only as a reminder of the ambivalent status of the expedition, but also its role as an imperial cultural formation, intertwined with acts of storytelling and literary conventions as much as they were geopolitical instruments and precursors of exploitative extractive economies. The expedition’s militaristic essence was the core concern that brought about the decline of this research practice. The term *expedition* has its roots in the Latin *expeditio*, ‘a voyage of war’, entering use in English and old French to refer to the action of expediting, that is to say helping to accomplish a particular task, or the prompt execution of, for example, the

judicial process or a long journey. The association with journeying would be further cemented through a broader understanding of *expediting* as the act of setting something into motion, but also through the more specific application of *expedition* from the mid-15th century to refer to “a body of persons, also a fleet, etc., sent out for a warlike or other definite purpose” (OED, 2017).

There is more here than mere etymology. The martial implications of “the expedition” remain to this day¹, even though it is perhaps more commonplace to associate modern expeditions with scientific research and popular ‘civilian’ acts of triumphant travel. And yet, as Clinkman (2012) observes, from as early as the 1760s there has been a distinct slipperiness in the definitional boundaries between the “warlike” [martial] and “other” purposes of expeditions, particularly so in respect of the pursuit of enlightenment science. The close association between the Royal Society and the Royal Navy during the late 18th century, including the co-organisation of international surveying expeditions (including Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon’s survey of the Transit of Venus) not only led to the enmeshing of the scientific and the military—what Clinkman (2012, 123) refers to as the “military-intellectual complex”—but also helped give shape to the expedition as a scientific and geographical practice. Equally significant, here, were contemporaneous traditions of scientific and colonial expeditions originating from across Enlightenment Europe, in particular France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Bleichmar’s (2012) account of ‘botanical expeditions’ during the Hispanic Enlightenment, for example, points to the Spanish navy’s role in expediting the scientific exploration of the Spanish Empire. The on-board interactions and collaboration of artists, naturalists and military officers during the Malaspina expedition (1789-1794) were productive of distinctly expeditionary visual materials (and visual cultures)—maps, charts, botanical and zoological illustrations, city and coastal views—the for the purpose of making the Spanish Empire ‘visible’ and ‘profitable’.

For Sorrenson (1996), the British naval ship epitomised this enmeshing. At once representative of a long evolving military technology and designed in response to warlike imperatives, it was, by the late-eighteenth century, a mobile ‘scientific instrument’ – providing “a superior, self-contained, and protected view of the landscape and civilisations” encountered during maritime expeditions (Sorrenson 1996, 222). While wooden barks such as *HMS Resolution* resisted straightforward transformation into “floating laboratories”—the attempt at which provoked the dissolution of the relationship between Capt. James Cook and the botanist Joseph Banks—they were “more than just vehicles or platforms for observers and instruments; they shaped the kind

¹ “Expeditionary” remains an actively used designation within the UK and US militaries in reference to Army, Navy and Air Force rapid response units involved in the projection of military power ‘overseas’.

of information observers collected” (Sorrenson 1996, 227). The science of hydrography was thus shaped in response to the ship’s requirements for safe harbour, ethnographic observations often prioritised the amenability of tribal groups to favourable trading relations, botanical sciences emphasised the availability of flora and fauna useful in maintaining the ship and sustaining its crew, while astronomical observations served to provide accurate positioning by latitude and longitude. Furthermore, the daily routines commonly practiced on-board British naval vessels equally served to routinize and discipline scientific observations, while the naval log book provided an organisational template for detailed scientific record keeping. The very materiality of the ship, and the performative dimensions of its management, thus resulted in a particular set of imperial and scientific epistemologies.

The militarization of the expedition is of course not merely a matter of uneasy histories. In a pointed critique, Joel Wainwright focuses on the *México Indígena* project (2005-8), which involved gathering data on indigenous peoples in Oaxaca. This research was undertaken as part of the American Geographical Society’s ‘Bowman Expeditions’, with the expressed intent of using geographers and geographical knowledge to enhance intelligence gathering for US foreign policy.² Funding was provided by the US Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), and supported by a private technology company contracted to supply operational assistance to the US Department of Defense. Rather than a singular collaborative venture, this was envisaged as a “prototype expedition” to be replicated around the world (Wainwright 2012, 52). But Wainwright’s critique goes further, by challenging the deep metaphysical roots of the enrolment of geography into military thinking: “geopiracy names a process of imperial extraction that is not temporarily limited to the present, not ethically limited to the acts of discrete individuals, nor a simple matter of winning the consent of subjects. Rather it reflects the afterlife of the Colombian encounter and its production of a divided world—the same world that empirical geographers take unproblematically as the object of analysis” (Wainwright 2012, 89). Within this critical framework, the expedition is the prime instrument in the toolbox of “militant empiricism” that feeds geopiracy. And piracy, we should recall, was exactly the analogy Swift harnessed to present his own critique of expeditions over two centuries earlier.

III. Drawing Inspirations: The Expedition’s Other Histories

² It is worth noting that expeditionary practice also made its mark in recent British debates: in 2009, the so called ‘Beagle Campaign’ spearheaded an initiative to reactivate (after a 10-year hiatus) the Royal Geographical Society’s in-house programme of sponsored expeditionary research, and to “re-establish the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) as the world leader of exploration endeavour” (Beagle Group, 2009). Although the Beagle Campaign was ultimately unsuccessful in their resolution, achieving 40% support at a Special General Meeting in May 2009, the RGS subsequently initiated a review of their support for scientific research and expeditions.

Given its militarised roots and violent histories, it is hardly surprising that the expedition has fallen out of favour as a reputable practice in the critical circles of contemporary geography. Yet the expedition has other histories and other epistemic genealogies that emerge as both an explicit critique of these violent imperial traditions and as part of a wider effort to present alternatives to them. These do not altogether dismiss the expedition, but rather explore the potential of its appropriation into some of the core traditions of critical scholarship within, and beyond geographical research.

1. *Postcolonial reading of the expedition*

In the introduction to his seminal critique of exploration history, Fabian (2000, 5) describes what has become the clichéd image of the expedition's protagonist:

Intrepid, heroic, courageous: these are but some of the obligatory adjectives preceding the noun *explorer*. In the illustrations of travelogues, those verbal flourishes parallel pictorial ones: the traveler's quasi-military grab, his faraway gaze, his proud and determined posture. He rides or walks ahead of his caravan; a few porters and guards are recognizable, while the rest blend into a file that gets smaller and smaller until it disappears in the landscape.

In an effort to debunk the “numbing repetition” (Pratt 1992, 2) of stereotypes, Fabian illuminates a history of exploration that bears no resemblance to the clear-minded and self-controlled image of the expeditioner. More often than not, he notes, expedition members were plagued by extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur, and feelings ranging from anger to contempt: “Much of the time they were in the thralls of “fever” and other tropical diseases, under the influence of alcohol or opiates (laudanum, a tincture of alcohol and opium, was the principal drug used to control acute and chronic dysentery), high doses of quinine, arsenic, and other ingredients from the expedition's medicine chest” (Fabian 2000, 3). What is at stake here is more than just a compelling history of “Travel as Tripping” (*ibid.*), but a more profound critique of an assumed rational core of scientific knowledge that guides expeditionary work.

Fabian's work is part of a broader corpus that critically returned to the archive in search of a more nuanced historiography of expeditionary culture and the process of colonial knowledge production. In a review of this broad historiographical revision, Dane Kennedy (2007) points to the work of Edward Said (1978), Paul Carter (1987) and Mary Louise Pratt (1992) as prominent critiques of the discourses and epistemologies of exploration that fed expeditionary practice. Though each offered distinct disciplinary critiques and geo-historical foci, these works illuminate the complicity of exploration discourse in the project of imperial expansion and its intellectual legitimization. This critique was accompanied by a parallel historiographical corpus that sought a

more primary and empirical engagement with the archive of exploration, while trying to avoid the pitfalls of earlier biographies of “the great explorers” (on this shift, see Liebersohn 2014, 41–42). One strand in this corpus analysed the way expeditions served the social and ideological orientations of state institutions like the British Admiralty (Stafford 1999; Richardson 2007) and voluntary societies that funded expeditionary work and to a large extent set their scientific agendas, the Royal Geographical Society being an obvious and well-documented example (Driver 2000; Stafford 2002; Gillham 2001). A second strand focused on the experience of expeditions in the field. This entailed a critique of the imaginative construction of distant lands as inherently alien and savage (Rabasa 1993), a characterization that enabled imperial powers to advocate a civilizing mission that was, in Simon Ryan’s words, ‘an anchorage for a mythological justification of possession’ (1996, 208). Yet later studies highlighted a different historiography of experience which provided a more granular, at times even intimate, understanding of the expedition as a space mired with uncertainty rather than stoic resolve; immensely dependent on indigenous labour and knowledge; reliant to a greater extent on the benevolence of rulers in Cairo and benefactors in Adelaide than on the expertise of civil servants in Whitehall (Kennedy 2013; see also Rockel 2006; Fabian 2000; Thomas 2014).

This expansion of the historiographical lens was also accompanied by greater attention to the transformative power of expeditionary practice. Beyond dispelling the popular myths of heroic conquest, the collision between metropolitan scientific protocols and non-Western quotidian realities exposed the fragility of core values and concepts that underpin the European imperial project. The revelations of the atrocities carried out by the rear column during Stanley’s Emin Pasha Relief Expedition (1886-1889), for example, led to criticism that publically questioned the ‘civilising mission’ and humanitarian ideals for which expeditions were celebrated (Driver 2000, chap. 6; Youngs 1994, chap. 4 & 5). These debates around expeditionary violence function as a colonial mirror, “which reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonize” (Taussig 1984, 495). Yet another critique focuses on the obsessive gathering, classification, interpretation and archivization of expeditionary knowledge, which exposed the “collective improvisation” (Richards 1993, 3) that lies at the heart of the imperial project, a laborious effort to compensate for the impossible task of exact civil control. Addressing the anxieties that ran through one of the most iconic expeditionary endeavours, Slemon (2006) notes that the mapping, naming and attempted ascent of ‘Everest’ in mid-19th century took place exactly at the time of growing British and Russian competition over Tibet and Nepal, making the mountain an allegory of domination at a moment of imperial crisis.

There was more here than shoring up the empire's geopolitical uncertainties. The archive of expeditions provides insights into more intimate psychic and emotive experience of their participants and reveals an affective terrain of anxiety, ignorance and bewilderment that exceeds the conventions of self-aggrandisement and personal triumph. For Jonathan Lamb (2001), the history of expeditions exposes the fear of a fraying 18th-century 'self', demonstrating more subtle forms of exchange that exist between explorers and indigenous populations, a recurring theme in the historiography of exploration (see, for example, B. Smith 1960; Schwartz 1994; Douglas 2014). In *Islands of Truth*, Daniel Clayton (2000) meticulously documents the time and space of contact that preceded the establishment of colonial government in the Canadian west coast. This account recognises the profound effects of expeditionary encounters on both explorers and indigenous populations, which in neither case falls into Manichean stereotypes. Moreover, the expeditionary encounter identified here takes place both on highly localised scales of interaction onboard Cook's ship and the more abstract spaces of contact forged in ledgers, maps and journals. These hyper-local encounters are in turn shown to have immense impact on the macro-geographies of Enlightenment, capitalism and colonialism.

Clayton's work also stands out for its ability to overcome the "two-camp mentality" (Mills 2001, 740) that sets historical analysis of the colonial world against a theoretical body of postcolonial critique. To a large extent, scholarly engagements with the expedition remain largely dominated by the association of expeditions squarely with the colonial toolkit. However, several post-colonial scholars have identified the expedition as a highly productive space through which to rethink the theoretical contours of the colonial encounter. In an account of Ludwig Leichhardt's second Australian expedition, Lars Eckstein identifies expeditionary encounters as acts of 'colonial mimesis', "where each world is dynamically translated into the other, ultimately unsettling conceptions of self and world at both ends" (Eckstein 2015, 519). Lorenzo Veranici (2015), meanwhile, analyses the settler colonial expedition as a unique type guided by the primary effort to disinherit the indigenous population and permanently inhabit its space, rather than the exploratory and extractive motivations that guided most imperial expeditions since the 18th century.

Though hardly forming a cohesive body of scholarship, post-colonial historiographies and theoretical engagements reveal the expedition to be a multifaceted practice that contains the full spectrum of the colonial process – from violence and dispossession to emancipatory acts and profound transformation of epistemic worlds. Yet the dominant critical concern remains historical in its orientation rather than seeking a revision of expeditionary practice. Later on we

return to some of these insights to consider how these realisations can be expanded and used to critically engage with this practice in the 21st century.

2. Feminist expeditionary traditions

Expeditions are perhaps the most obvious instrument of that particular historiography of geography that was rightly derided as an “exclusionary chronological litany of white, male, aristocratic heroes” (Mitchell and Smith 1990, 223). Yet a growing body of Feminist scholarship over the past three decades highlights the role of women in exploratory history and, in particular, the alternative epistemology that feminist historiography brings to the fore. This corpus does more than just note the history of women’s participation in expeditions from the early 20th century, but presents a significantly different approach to core elements of expeditionary discourse that validate it as an instrument of knowledge production. In a recent study of women’s participation in and experience of RGS-funded expeditions in the 20th century, Evans (2015) points out how this critique particularly sought to problematise the centrality of the destination and the conventions of self-fashioning that dominate geographical expeditionary discourse.

The very essence of expeditions, it seems, concerns their arrival in and analysis of a site that is set as their ultimate target. This element—the idea of travelling into the unknown, into dangerous places—remains an inseparable element of expeditionary imaginaries, of the discursive conception of expeditionary spaces, and of the process of validating and authenticating expeditionary knowledge production. The conquest of the desired, and very often feminised destination becomes “a performance which enacts some of the discipline’s underlying masculinist assumptions about its knowledge of the world” (Rose 1993, 65). These conventional imaginations of expeditionary ‘sites’ also shaped the ideal protagonist for their “discovery” – the stoic, enduring hero, capable of coping with difficult, dangerous and even life-threatening expeditionary conditions (Rose 1993; see also Sparke 1996). As feminist critique of these discourses illuminates, heroic endurance is deeply intertwined with gendered imaginations, envisaging a (white, heterosexual, able-bodied) male hero fieldworker, often in conjunction with a feminised Nature of which he is master (Rose 1993; see also Maguire 1998; Hall, Healey, and Harrison 2002).

As Domosh importantly identifies, post-Victorian exploratory practice of women like Louise Boyd integrated scientific activities into their expeditions, but these quests were not explicitly

meant to discover “new lands”. The so-called new lands that Boyd surveyed were discovered by accident:

Louise had never set out to ‘conquer’ and ‘discover’; she more or less stumbled upon what became Miss Boyd Land and the Louise Boyd Bank. So when she at last decided to go the North Pole, her motive was curiosity and a need for emotional satisfaction rather than ambition. (Olds 1985, 290; quoted in Domosh 1991, 101)

Recognising serendipity, chance and intuitive curiosity is more than a gesture of humility, but also a break with a masculine epistemology of exploration that valorised calculated action and intentionality. This masculine expeditionary epistemology served a very narrow interpretation of what would be recognised as a worthwhile accomplishment, namely, the “destination drive” that still lies at the heart of many contemporary expeditionary conventions. Conversely, women’s early expeditionary experience fell under the less-prestigious category of journeys that “proceed between known points, with no suggestion of adding to knowledge other than through traversing unfamiliar routes” (Stoddart 1986, 149). From the 19th century, women who took part in expeditions were not oblivious to expeditionary conventions of knowledge production and self-fashioning, but their experiences also capture in their writing a very different approach. As Dea Birkett notes, “The woman travellers followed invisible red lines across a map into a distant unknown. But the pot of gold they were chasing was not the mountain, the source of the river, or the oasis in the desert, but the long shadow, cast by the tropical sunlight and mountain glare, of themselves” (2004, 71).

These accounts challenge not only the conventional focus on site-specific destinations as the ultimate *raison d’être* of expeditionary practice, but also points to a different process of “self-fashioning”, to borrow Stephen Greenblatt’s phrase (2005). The particular concern with the expeditionary self should not be confused with the celebrations of the heroics of the individual explorer. Rather, we find in this tradition an opportunity to critically reflect on one’s own positionality in the process of knowledge production, even when the image of the explorer is explicitly anti-heroic. Evelyn Cheesman’s 1921 account of her research in Tahiti, for example, deconstructs the ethos of heroic self-sacrifice in the name of scientific discovery:

There can be few more terrible sensations than when both feet suddenly slide away from under one, in the middle of a climb over slippery rock at a steep gradient. Indeed after three such experiences, each of which brought a period of intense mental agony – when for the time being I was all animal with just an animal craving for life and nothing more, and with scarcely the consciousness that there was only the support of two fistfuls of bracken between me and a sheer drop of many hundreds of feet – I decided that nothing, not even the discovery of fifty new insects belonging to fifty new orders, could ever compensate for those hideous moments. (quoted in Evans 2015, 177–178)

The unravelling of expeditionary heroics and destination-driven conventions importantly challenges the ways through which expeditions exercise power and authority over people and place. Reading Mary Kingsley's writing from her work in West Africa, Blunt (1994) stresses how these accounts offer a critical alternative to the textual strategies of masculine exploration, their fantasies of domination and possession and imperial discourses of power. Instead, the experience of women in expeditions reveals deep ambiguities about both expeditionary practice and their dominant ideology. Kingsley's ascent to Mount Cameroon during her final expedition generates "no exultation, but only a deep disgust" (quoted in Blunt 1994, 103) because of heavy mist that prevented any view from the peak. For Blunt, this is not a failure, but part of a broader set of anti-conquest accounts, narrations and documentations that explicate the power conventions that are part of the exploration discourse and offer alternative accounts, even if that alterity is as subtle as a blocked view from a mountain top. Failures, strain and fear are not simply folded into a heroic tale of "triumph-in-the-face-of-adversity", but rather point critical attention to expeditionary discourse itself and the conventions it carries with it.

What emerges here is not a comprehensive feminist expeditionary agenda. At best, these are fragments of critical interventions in the broad masculine historiography of expeditions and the epistemology of exploration. However, these historical chapters and the critical interventions inspired by them remain crucial components in any reconsideration of the role of expeditions as a contemporary critical methodology.

3. Radical traditions

One of the most important efforts to critically reshape the notion of the expedition was carried out by the Society for Human Exploration, a short-lived, though powerful educational and research project that operated intermittently from 1968 to 1975. The project was launched by a group of geographers and community activists, and included several "geographical expeditions", most notable among them were the 1969 the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI), which was followed three years later by the Canadian-American Geographical Expedition. Aiming to break traditional conventions of research and institutional education, the project sought to combine an agenda of socially-committed scholarship with radical explorations of action research strategy (Katz 1996). In what became a cornerstone of radical geography (Heyman 2007; Castree 2000; for an opposing position, see Peet 1978, 15), the expeditions and the pedagogy they promoted offered a critical response to the social and political context of the time, particularly the U.S. civil rights and anti-war movements and the racialized violence that

became an endemic feature of the North American inner-city (Horvath 1971; Merrifield 2008). The Society for Human Exploration and the subsequent discussion inspired by its work provides us with the third element in the critical reconsideration of expeditions, primarily through its role in facilitating broader practices of critical pedagogy and emancipatory techniques.

The insistence on holding on to the seemingly-arcane notion of the expedition was part of a conscious attempt to rid exploration of its exotic and imperial impulses. Rather than simply dismiss the tainted practices of exploration, the project appropriated and recalibrated them to function as critical methodologies. Bill Bunge (1969, 2), who led the project along with local community leader Gwendolyn Warren, suggested that the purpose of exploration would no longer be a search for paradise but a search within the self, a means to develop “a more appropriate base map for our times.” Bunge addresses this problematic legacy explicitly, stating that “unlike earlier expeditions, so many of which were exploitative [...] human explorations are “contributive,” (resource contributing instead of resource taking)” (Bunge 1969, 4). This was part of a broader reversal of the expedition’s priorities and the democratization of its research process, from the formulation of the problems that are to be addressed to the total immersion of the researcher in a community:

It is also a democratic, as opposed to an elitist expedition. Local people are to be incorporated as students and as professors. They are not to be further exploited. Their point of view is given first place. It is democratic also in that if planning work results [in negative outcomes], and that is one of the main purposes of the Expedition, then the planners, the geographers, are expected to live in the mess that they created (Bunge 1969, 4)

Turning the conventions of expeditions on their head was not only a critique of geographical traditions but an effort to set a new agenda for politically engaged scholarship. Andy Merrifield, for instance, claims that “there is much to learn from the legacy of practical expeditions into the world of the exploited and oppressed outside the academy” (2008, 182); Iain Hay argues that geographers ought to “promote change through community-based research such as that of Bill Bunge” (2001, 41), while Pawson and Teather (2002) see it as a model for “engaged” student field work. In an important reading of the DGEI, Rich Heyman notes that the pedagogical emphasis of the expeditions, which focused on community-generated knowledge, constituted a “wholesale reconceptualization of the social role of geographical knowledge production, and the role of the geographer in social change” (2007, 106–107; see also Katz 1996). Heyman rightly insists on the inseparability of research and pedagogy in the DGEI, thus highlighting the contribution of critical expeditionary practice to feminist debates on situated knowledge and participatory action research.

Despite their critical merits and contribution to the formation of a different pedagogy and as such, a different power/knowledge relation, the expeditions carried out by the Society for Human Exploration were often articulated through the familiar language of self-aggrandizing militarism and rather conventional rhetoric of masculine exploration (Katz 1996). The ethos of collaborative knowledge production and the challenge this poses to the privileged status of the individual academic-researcher/explorer is undermined by Bunge's rhetoric: "If there are any dirty or dangerous or doubtful experiences to be faced, the geographers go first, and the leader of the Expedition goes very first" (Bunge 1969, 5). Though it does not altogether disclaim the contributions of Society for Human Exploration and its expeditions, this machismo is a familiar echo of the somewhat more conventional heroic self-presentation of the expeditioner, which undermines its core effort to decentralise individual triumph for the rarely-spectacular production of situated knowledge. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bunge's work became—at least nominally—an inspiration for more recent geographic engagements with urban exploration (Garrett 2013; Pinder 2005). As Mott and Roberts (2014) note, these accounts of urban exploration often valorise the individualised embodied experience of "the field", and conform to a familiar image of the late 19th century explorer, complete with "a 'hard body' [which] embodied strength, fortitude, and glorified athleticism that endured extreme hardship, and in fact thrived on adventure, daring and danger" (Morin 2008, 908). Despite their best efforts, the deeper conventions that have plagued expeditionary discourse and practice for centuries seem to perforate even more recent radical experimentations that seek its subversion.

IV. Plotting a Way Forward: Exploratory Vignettes from No Man's Land

What emerges from the three genealogies above is not a clear and coherent agenda for the rethinking of the expedition as a critical methodology. For us, these critiques were both a warning and an inspiration to experiment with some of the conventions of the expedition in an effort to avoid some of the methodological and political pitfalls this research practice presents. As we pointed out in the introduction, our intention is not to make an unambiguous case in support of the expedition. We fully recognise that this practice is bound up with particular privileges, skewed models of funding and condition specific institutional dependencies that are unequally experienced and often perpetuate hierarchies of gender, race and class (Bell, Caplan, and Karim 2013). However we also recognise that expeditions remain part of the ethos of geography and related social sciences, with new opportunities for funding and institutional patronage. Our aim is therefore more humble, focusing on the potential for creative

manipulation of expeditionary conventions and introducing critical engagement into familiar praxis. In what follows, two such interventions are outlined: a push against the singularity of the destination and the creative potential of serendipity. As we show, each offers a practical critique of the traditional expeditionary form, and opens potential horizons for a more creative scholarly engagement with this research method.

1. *Destination: (not) getting there*

Let us begin at the end. On the 4th of October 2015, a 39-word message was sent from an official at the Egyptian Embassy in London, which turned down our request to enter Bir Tawil, an unclaimed territory situated on the border between Egypt and Sudan. The precise message read (all typos in the original):

“I am soory to inform you that the Egyptian authorities in Cairo informed us that they are not going to be able to acoomodate your planed visit to Egypt and grant you the required permissions to continue your journey.”

This message marked, in more ways than one sense, the dead end of a 6000-mile expedition we led in the autumn of 2015, in search of no-man’s land. The expedition, which set off in London and travelled through Western Europe, the Balkans and Cyprus, had its final destination in Bir Tawil, a trapezoid-shaped territory on the Egypt-Sudan border, which to this day remains unclaimed by either country. In quite a literal manner, by rejecting our request, the Egyptian authorities marked the end of the road for our research journey, forcing us to end our journey south at a desert checkpoint on the outskirts of Aswan, surrounded by piles of dumped construction debris and flying plastic bags. More than 400 miles from our intended destination, we were forced to u-turn and head back.

On the face of it, we simply joined a long tradition of expeditions that failed to reach their destination, though unlike many of our predecessors, we didn’t die trying. The moment when an expedition is forced to turn back has become a recurring and conventional motif in the cannon of expeditionary tales, and in itself, offers few critical insights. However, there is a longer process of exchange and negotiation that precedes this singular moment. Formulating our critique through these extended durations potentially shifts attention from fantasies of conquest to subtler geographies of knowledge and spatialisations of power.

In our case, the laconic message was the last in a months-long series of correspondences and conversations undertaken in an effort to receive Egyptian approval for our request to reach Bir

Tawil. One element that became obvious during this process was the bewilderment of many Egyptian officials about our destination. Several times during these phone calls and face-to-face conversations, our interlocutors—Embassy officials, staff at the Egyptian Cultural and Educational Bureau—admitted complete ignorance about Bir Tawil, and had no clue who would be in a position to grant access to it. In one of these conversations a secretary at the Egyptian Cultural Bureau admitted she had never heard of the place, but added, “This sounds like a fun trip. Can I join?”

This recurring bewilderment and bureaucratic confusion is partly due to the murky demarcation of Egypt’s southern border. At its core was the 1899 British-Egyptian treaty, which set the border between Egypt and Sudan along the 22nd parallel (British and foreign state papers 1902, 19). Three years later, however, another document was drawn up by the British. This one noted that a mountain area just south of the 22nd parallel, was home to the nomadic Ababda tribe, which was considered to have stronger links with Egypt than with Sudan. The document stipulated that henceforth this area—Bir Tawil—should be administered by Egypt. Meanwhile, a much-larger triangle of land north of the 22nd parallel, named Hala’ib, abutting the Red Sea, was assigned as grazing land for tribes who are largely based in Sudan, and thus now came under Sudan’s jurisdiction (Office of the Geographer, Department of State 1962; Reyner 1963). Because of its proximity to the coast and its potential mineral wealth, both countries claimed Hala’ib, and consequently, neither have sought to extend their sovereignty over Bir Tawil over the intervening decades. From this historical maze, a no-man’s land was born, hence our initial curiosity about this desert territory.

But for Egyptian officials, our request posed a rather peculiar dilemma. In one phone conversation, a secretary at the Egyptian Embassy who knew about the southern border and its sensitivities said that he could not issue us a permit to access Bir Tawil because Egypt doesn’t recognise it as part of its sovereign jurisdiction. “This isn’t ours, so I can’t say you can go” he said.

This candid statement from the embassy official was in fact highly revealing. It illuminates how existing improvisatory structures of governance (Jeffrey 2013) and bureaucratic anxieties are amplified when confronted with no-man’s land: These spaces frustrate normative access regimes and restrict conventional forms of state performativity, but there is no way to bring these lacuna to light without going through the Sisyphean process of request, explanation, reassurance and persuasion. Taking this into account, if we look once more at the short refusal message which denied us access to Bir Tawil, it suddenly reads not simply as a casual dismissal by an indifferent

state machine, but as a carefully considered effort to state a clear restriction without ever assuming any responsibility for the space in question. Note that the text neither mentions Bir Tawil by name nor makes any determination about the ability or inability to access it. Instead, it only polices the general permissions to continue our journey. The restriction of access in this case seems almost secondary, masking a more intricate relationship of the sovereign to the administration and preservation of territorial integrity, as well as the policing of mobilities that potentially threaten this integrity (e.g. Brown 2010; see also Gregoriou 2006). This threat, we would argue, is first and foremost discursive—with the written permit acting as a powerful technology of rule (Shenhav and Berda 2009) and an equally potent signifier of those spaces that remain un-ruly and un-ruled.³

There is certainly more to say about the administrative and political webs that surround no-man's land, as well as the peculiarities of the Egypt-Sudan case. But we posit this debate to illustrate the potential of productively undermining the expeditionary destination. It would of course be nearly impossible to imagine an expedition completely devoid of an end-point. Our suggestion is therefore to turn to the extensive paper trails that surround the expedition and which offer critical insights without necessitating an actual presence in or arrival at a predetermined destination. The consequence is first a dismissal of any fantasy of conquest that continues to fuel expeditionary imaginations, and relatedly, the heroics associated with the figure of the explorer. Put rather crudely, if you can't get there, you can't claim to own it. Secondly, against the conventional focus on the isolated moment of arrival and the singularity of the destination (with its highly conventionalised choreographies and documentary practices (J. R. Ryan 2013)), what is proposed here is a more subtle attention to the multiple temporalities of the expedition – durations of actual travel, but just as importantly, the significance of waiting, experiences of deferrals and practices of delay. These dimensions of immobility were certainly not absent from historical experience of the expedition (Fabian 2000, 43–5). But foregrounding their contemporary appearances links the expeditionary practices to critical efforts to rethink waiting, deferral and delay, not as signs of incompetence or error, but as intentional acts of governance and integral components of state-generated uncertainty (Griffiths 2013; Bagelman 2016).

2. *Chance Encounters: Structuring Serendipity*

³ So long as this administrative clarity is upheld, the Egyptian authorities seem rather indifferent to whether one finds a clandestine way into Bir Tawil; when we enquired with Egyptian officials about the recent highly-publicised journey of an American man who claimed Bir Tawil as his “sovereign territory” (Shenker 2016), we usually got rather uninterested shrugs.

During a brief stopover in Sarajevo in late-September 2015, midway through the No Man's Land expedition, we met the Bosnian film director Danis Tanović to talk about his debut film, *No Man's Land* (2001). What was initially planned as an hour-long meeting on the cultural dimensions of no-man's land in the context of the Balkan war, turned into a conversation that spanned several hours, a meal and a walking tour of Sarajevo led by Tanović himself. At the end of the day, he handed us a parting gift hastily retrieved from his apartment nearby – a bottle of wine with an intriguing name. This was a bottle that had been presented to him in 2001 when his debut film was receiving prizes at film festivals around the world, and had somehow survived unopened for the next fourteen years. The wine, like the film for which it was presented, was called 'No Man's Land'.

The label told us that the wine was Bulgarian, produced in a town called Damianitza and a quick check of our map showed Damianitza close to Bulgaria's southern border with Greece, and only a short detour from the route we planned to take three days later. We were intrigued to know more and, after many wrong turns and several confused phone calls, we found the town, the winery and the man who had produced the bottle of wine given to us a few days before.

Founded in 1940 and nationalised in 1947, the Damianitza winery had for most of its operational life produced large quantities of cheap wine for the proletariat of the Soviet Union. Grapes for red wine were sourced from across southern Bulgaria, including the south facing slopes of the former Cold War frontier between Bulgaria and Greece. Some of the best growing conditions for indigenous Melnik grapes were to be found within the frontier zone – the 5km-wide tract of graduated restrictions, watchtowers, fences, patrol stations and armed police that sought to keep Bulgarians 'in' and Westerners 'out'. When the Damianitza Winery was re-privatised in 1997, the new owners saw an opportunity to capitalise on the intriguing collision of viticulture and geopolitics by using the grapes from the exclusion zone to make their signature wine, which they named "No Man's Land".

Vineyards still cover the landscape of the former no-man's land and so, too, do remnants of the Cold War. The neat rows of viticulture cultivation intersect with the rusting wires and concrete stanchions that used to form near-impenetrable defences against capitalism. Military patrol booths have been repurposed as agricultural storage sheds, and watchtowers still peak above the surrounding hilltops – visible reminders that the border was once a highly surveilled forbidden zone. This intersection of pristine preservation of age-old agricultural environments and destructive militarization marks one of the common features of no-man's land, a space where destruction and conservation so often go hand in hand (Leshem and Pinkerton 2016; Coates

2014). But how visible would these sites have been without the serendipitous presentation of the wine bottle a few days earlier in Sarajevo? The realisation that we could, so easily, have driven straight through this landscape without uncovering this particular narration of no man's land forced us to reflect on the interrelationship between 'the expedition', chance and serendipitous encounters.

Viewed solely as "the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident" (*OED*), serendipity seems a rather flimsy foundation for rethinking the expedition as a critical research practice. Too much seems to be left to blind luck. However, we return to this concept not simply to reiterate its "'disorderly,' 'messy' features [...] but also [its] substance, method, and significance" (Fine and Deegan 1996, 437). One of the most influential attempts to rethink serendipity in social scientific research was carried out by the sociologist of science Robert K. Merton, who traces the term to the mid-18th century. Coined by Horace Walpole, serendipity was based on the title of a 'silly fairy tale' (as Walpole himself described it), *The Three Princes of Serendip*. In a letter to a friend, Walpole noted that the three heroes of this tale "were always making discoveries by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of" (quoted in Merton and Barber 2004, 1). For Merton, it was the coupling of accidents *and* sagacity— coincidence and logical intent—that made serendipity more than a random accident. This tension between structuration and event, between control and creativity, also highlight serendipity's active critical potential, posing, in Lorraine Daston's (2004, 30) terms, an "uncomfortable conundrum" to empiricist methodologies that venerated intent, predictability and the deliberate mind of the scientific discoverer. Rather than submit to the confines of the planned and the predictable, serendipity heightens our attention to "the way concepts emerge from the unexpected bumps and nudges of the material world" (Silver 2015, 236).

Seeing serendipity as a critical inclination towards the unexpected has great potential in re-orienting the expedition from its deeply teleological underpinnings, its intellectual and practical focus on predetermined goals, toward a more inductive process of conceptualization. Our own expedition was motivated by a deep uncertainty about the conceptual foundations and empirical realities that constituted no-man's land. Intentionally structuring the expedition to accommodate unexpected detours is not just a matter of logistical flexibility (that is often at odds with the requirements of risk assessment and emergency action planning), but of conceptual openness and a willingness to cede some of the control over the direction of the research.

It is important to note that serendipity presents its own pitfalls. Fine and Deegan (1996, 437), for example, argue that the inclusion of occurrences of serendipity in accounts of ethnographic

fieldwork is a battle won long ago. Narratives celebrating the play and surprise of research are now deeply woven into the conventional orientation of critical social research. But exactly because of the common presence, an uncritical celebration of serendipity may inadvertently reinforce the heroic image of the social scientist who pulls meaning from chaos. It is impossible to ignore this risk. But, we would argue, the critical effort to challenge the overreliance on predetermined procedures and predictable outcomes of knowledge production that have dominated expeditionary logics for centuries must draw inspiration from the important alternatives offered by Feminist histories of exploration and their willingness to structure a very different encounter with the world.

Conclusion

This paper should not be read as a lament for the decline of expeditions; there should be no nostalgia to the glory days of exploration. In fact, the dubious status of expeditions in contemporary social sciences is a welcome result of ongoing efforts to de-colonise knowledge production, expose its complicity in racial violence and in the perpetuation of gender hierarchies and masculinist cultures of scholarship. However, the outright dismissal of the expedition as merely a remnant of chauvinistic imperial exploration, risks ignoring a more nuanced history in which this practice and its protagonists bear no resemblance to legacies of conquest and myths of masculine heroics. Considered through these critical historiographies, the expedition appears as a malleable practice that can be critically appropriated and manipulated in ways that retains and furthers the critique, while also experimenting with concrete alternatives. Expeditions remain part of geographical legacies and feature heavily in popular culture, and there is perhaps a need for a comprehensive alternative agenda that counters their conventional form. Yet the need for interventions that are perhaps less grand, but are nevertheless rooted in critical practice is, to our mind, both loyal to the critical legacies we bring together here, and are perhaps more likely to make a lasting effect.

In this paper we foreground the decentralization of the destination and the potential of serendipity as two possible interventions that push against expeditionary conventions. But furthering this critical engagement will require consideration of other aspects that remain central to contemporary practice. Two elements in particular come to mind in this regard: First, subverting the lingering veneration of the explorer as an individualised expert. Recent scholarship highlighted the critical importance of “go-betweens” and indigenous expertise in what Shafer *et al* (2009) describe as “the brokered world” of imperial knowledge making (see also Driver and Jones 2009). Already hinted in the critical approaches that informed our own

practice, expeditionary histories of collaborative knowledge production offer important lessons for future critical expeditionary practice.

Another potential line of inquiry regards the expedition as a distinct cultural genre, with its particular conventions of representation, interpretation, distribution and consumption. “Exploration,” as Keighren *et al.* note, “usually also had a lasting public “afterlife” as the results were debated in scientific institutions as well as in the periodical and newspaper press” (2015, 7). For this afterlife to be brought into being, observations not only had to be made during the process of travel, but also recorded, to be written down, to be mapped, drafted into charts, or drawn onto canvases. The collected information needed, moreover, to be made meaningful – and not only to those people who observed first hand, but to others who might follow in their wake. This cultural economy of representation and interpretation continues to fuel and fashion contemporary expeditions, but can also be a point of creative intervention. In his project *Liverpool-to-Liverpool*, artist Simon Faithful crossed the Atlantic on board a container ship documenting the minutiae of daily life on land and sea through a series of rudimentary Palm Pilot drawings (Faithfull 2010). These pictorial “outputs” reflect on cultures of maritime mobility and exploration, but also question familiar technologies of representation through which voyages are documented, circulated and consumed (Keighren, Withers, and Bell 2015; J. R. Ryan 2013). Our own work with Faithful and other artists during the expedition was guided exactly by this conscious effort to make explicit the labour that goes into the representation of experience and knowledge, while simultaneously seeking less conventional practices that push against the still-dominant conventions of exploration prose and imagery.

There is reason for ongoing scepticism about the expedition: its colonial baggage and militarised foundations are impossible to shake off; it relies on and perpetuates particular privileges and institutional dependencies; and all too often, grand promises of expeditionary alternatives fall far short of their radical promise. Yet revisiting the expedition’s multifaceted histories, and identifying creative ways to re-engage with its practices also opens potential horizons of critical expeditionary methods. While still uneasy, a critical expedition forces us at the very least to face the consequences of our actions and, in Bunge’s term, live with the mess we create.

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